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## **“A Pleasant Tragicomedy, the Cat Being Scap’t”?: William Sampson’s *The Vowbreaker* (1636) and the Instability of Genre.**

Now, there’s one thing I know for sure—there’s no sure thing with an animal. Even though this cat had done this behavior perfectly in the confines of my home, the theatre was a very large space. I didn’t want him getting spooked, running and getting hurt by the scenery, or crawling out into the audience. I had a black collar on him that matched his fur, and then I got a little piece of fishing line so that he would always be leashed but the audience wouldn’t be able to see it. Every day during the supper hour, I would go in and try to teach the cat to get his food. Champ did very well, just like at home—he was hungry, he did his bit, and at the end he got his full meal and was very happy. The first time we tried it with David Alan Grier, the sets, the lights, and the sounds of people yelling and booing confused Champ a little, but by dress rehearsal, he was doing it perfectly. (Berloni 2008, 59)

If you *are* going to ignore the old advice never to work with children or animals, surely the most risky of all domestic animals in a theatrical context must be the cat. Bill Berloni’s account (above) of his successful training of ‘Champ’ for *First* (1981), Martin Charnin’s musical about the first black major-league baseball player, Jackie Robinson (1919-1972), makes clear that it is possible. However, Berloni’s first reaction was the normal theatrical attitude to such a task: ‘Martin, I don’t really know anything about cats. They’re difficult animals to train. I’ve had cats, but they don’t really listen to people’ (Berloni 2008, 56).

Despite this, for early modern playwrights – as for Martin Charnin – the allusive properties of the on-stage cat seemed to have outweighed the difficulties. Three plays of the period exploit the possibilities – W. S.’s *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* (c. 1562), Ben Jonson’s *Every Man Out of His Humour* (1599), and the little-known domestic tragedy *The Vow-Breaker* (1636) by William Sampson, a very minor Nottinghamshire poet and playwright. Bruce Boehrer (2010) reconfigures how we must read *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* in its early modern context, so here I will deal only with the latter two plays, drawing on his work to continue the story.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the less well-known play,

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<sup>1</sup> Boehrer kindly acknowledges my chapter on *Gammer Gurton* (Grant 2001) as providing some material for his own (better) work (Boehrer 2010, 202, n. 6).

*The Vow-Breaker*, is in some ways more interesting (and more baffling) but it is in conversation with Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humour* (Jonson 2001), so that is where we must start.

### **Every Cat Out of Her Bag**

Jonson's 1598 play, the second of his humours comedies, seems to take the attitude that if you are going to work with one animal, you might as well work with two. Famously the play revivifies Pliny's story about the performing dog which can act out its own death by poisoning, and to some extent the play can be seen as a riposte to the untrainable Crab in Shakespeare's earlier *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* (Grant 2007, 104-5). Jonson's comic knight-errant, Puntarvolo, is always accompanied by his greyhound, a symbol of his knighthood, of which the dog is not merely the principal objectification, but some kind of embodiment (Beadle 1994, 24; Grant 2007, 99ff). Even the play's characters find it difficult to tell them apart: Puntarvolo substitutes his dog's supposed needs for his own. Threatened by the idea that Shift will teach his dog to smoke, he uses this as an excuse for not dining with Shift: 'Pardon me. My dog shall not eat in his company for a million.' (3.i.487-8). Puntarvolo's assumption of his dog's person and personality is paralleled by the blending of those of his cat and his wife: notably, his wife and the cat are both female, whereas Puntarvolo and his dog are male, a common alignment both now and for the early moderns. Puntarvolo's sex-life is also subject to his Don Quixote complex, and he woos his wife up a ladder, in *persona*, observed by a crowd of onlookers. Quite understandably, she objects to this and punishes Puntarvolo by deciding not to take part in the family holiday (them and the dog) to Constantinople and back, a journey on which her husband has placed a substantial wager and for which he is therefore forced to substitute their cat. Jonson makes much of the small differences between wife and cat in order to reinforce the parallels: Carlo suggests the cat is a better bet because she has eight more lives than Puntarvolo's wife, and Puntarvolo notes that the cat 'will never be Sea-sick, which will save me so much in conserves' (3.i.79-80). While his wife

sulks in her room, his cat is confined to hers with sore eyes and, naturally, catarrh. Her appearance in a bag (3.i.55SD) reminds an audience both of the safest way to deal with cats (especially on stage) and of the old trick of substituting a cat for a pig-in-a-poke:

in French 'acheter chat en poche'. The reference is to a common trick in days gone by of substituting a cat for a sucking-pig, and trying to palm it off on greenhorns. If anyone heedlessly bought the article without examination he bought a 'cat' for a 'pig'; but if he opened the sack he 'let the cat out of the bag' and the trick was disclosed (Brewer 1978, 977).

Furthermore, it is a substitution joke which cleverly reinforces the comparison of the real thing (Puntarvolo's wife) with an imitation (the cat), salient in a play so concerned with appearances concealing the truth, just as Sogliardo tries to cover his mercantile roots with aristocratic manners and finery.

Indeed, this is also a safety measure, as W. J. Lawrence noted in 1932: 'with precautionary tact, a cat is brought in in a bag in *Every Man Out Of His Humour*' (Lawrence 1932, 18; see also Barton 1984, 71-2). The cat makes two appearances only, in 3.i and 4.iii, both occasions in a bag: when Puntarvolo reveals to Carlo the substitution of the bagged cat for his wife on the journey, and when he instructs his servant to show the cat to the notary, demonstrating that she is shielded from the audience's eyes by the bag. Of course, this might have comic value of its own as the cat (if it is, indeed, in the bag) would be bound to yowl or wriggle while the notary is trying to get a good enough look at her to 'draw an indenture' (l. 2) of 'her character' (l. 8). Indeed, because of its rich comic potential, if, as Matthew Bliss suggests, that the cat is 'a sack of rags' (Bliss 1994, 55), then the servant is almost duty bound to pretend-struggle with the bag as if it contains a cat. Even when 'precautionary tact' is taken, perhaps the very infrequency of appearance indicates that a real cat might have been used, a reminder of feline stage-unpredictability. It is in this last connection that stage cats are at their most speaking, as Berloni noted. So Jonson's cat in *Every*

*Man Out of His Humour* not only displays precautionary tact but makes a visual joke for the audience. This scene reveals, at once, the strengths and weaknesses of animals in drama: it is impossible to rely on a cat on stage but, even bagged up, she can make a joke without making a sound. So much of what makes early modern drama work – the doubleness of vision its metatheatricality requires – is encapsulated in the cat-in-the-bag which is not a pig but may not even be a cat. Nicholas Ridout's observations about the challenges animals make to modern theatre are radically *not* operating in Jonson's cat scenes: 'bringing in an animal' may be 'courting disaster', but it is a deliberate disaster for comic effect (Ridout 2006, 98). When Ridout cautions that we not 'lean against the wall or the cultural equation collapses' the whole mode of early modern drama is revealed: that is *exactly* what early modern drama's metatheatricality demands that we do. We could reformulate this as Bert O. States puts it, '[As] something on stage arouses awareness of its external (or workaday) significations, its internal (or illusionary) signification is reduced...It becomes interesting...when one thinks how much theater is intentionally devoted to confusing these two orders of signification, if not trying to subjugate one to the power of the other' (States 1985, 36). On the early modern stage – and Ridout's enumeration of the conditions of modern theatre brings this forcibly to mind – nature is *not* 'rigorously excluded', 'natural light' *does* come in, *no* 'temporary floors and walls simulate the rooms of our houses and other built spaces' (Ridout 2006, 98). This is theatre which shares the bear-baiting arena, is played in daylight and does without scenery; a theatre which goes out of its way, in Ridout's own words, to 'introduc[e] a kind of self-parodic comment on [its] own play between these two registers of perception...[in which] the animal on stage [is] both animal as thing and meaningful image' (Ridout 2006, 178).

## **Yowl, yowl, yowl, yowl**

Cats are, indeed, a useful subject in literature where, with aplomb, they can perform viciousness, and have it performed upon them. Did the usefulness of other domestic animals – dogs, pigs and horses, for instance – protect them from senseless torture, whereas cats, as well as being eerily human, performed no useful activity (except limited mouse-catching) as far as the early moderns could see? Folkloric and literary references to cats show a horrifying tendency towards cruelty: from Benedict's assertion that his marriage would entitle his friends to 'hang [him] in a bottle like a cat and shoot at [him]' (*Much Ado* I.i.248-9), to the famously gruesome Kilkenny cats (see Grant 2001 and Boehrer 2010). The game to which Benedict is referring involves shooting arrows at a cat constrained within a leather bag hung on a tree, while the cats in Kilkenny had their tails tied together and were flung across a clothes line to fight. Clearly part of the dubious attraction of both of these sports was the yowling noise the cats would make. Furthermore, perhaps because the disturbing nature of her 'human' cry demanded an alienating defence against identification with the human, the cat was seen to be 'an unclean and impure beast that liveth only upon vermin and by ravening', something supported by people's propensities to be allergic to cats (Thomas 1983, 109). Because they both hunted rodents, the cat was often classed with the fox: folkloric marriages between the cat and vixens were not uncommon. Reynard constantly, though perhaps not entirely convincingly, refers to Tibert as 'my dear cousin' and Noble the Lion tells Tibert that he is being sent to fetch Reynard to trial because 'though he be fell to other beasts he trusts you well and shall do by your counsel' (Caxton 1960, 64). Perhaps the most bizarre tales about tortured cats are those which are well-documented historical fact, more resonant because we are unable to dismiss them, as we can with folklore, as an expression of what humans *want* to do to cats. William

Dugdale recounts an annual tradition at the Inner Temple on St. Stephen's Day when a cat and a fox were hunted in the Hall by a pack of hounds (Dugdale 1666, 156). This pastime must be seen as a peculiarly masculine practice and in some ways acts out an aggression designed, in its choice of hunted animal, to uphold the symbolic tradition of the educated male elite. Specifically anti-female, and anti-social inferiors (fox-hunting, though becoming more acceptable in the seventeenth century, came traditionally a poor social second to the aristocratic deer-hunting), is the pursuit of cat and fox by that bastion of male chivalric virtue, the hound. A community composed entirely of young men, like the Inner Temple or the Kilkenny garrison, seems to be the most typical setting for cat torture. This violence is gendered, and it is framed through the use of the traditionally-female cat.

Ridout argues that the exploitation of stage animals foregrounds the 'work', the 'signs of labour' performance traditionally seemed to seek to conceal, and that children and animals 'point through this neurosis to the alienation of the actor and to the economic conditions of her presence on stage' (Ridout 2006, 101). For Ridout, stage animals are 'phantoms' of the animal presence in the drama which pre-dates Attic tragedy and 'which humanity had not yet violently compelled to succumb to its own rational purposes, nor stripped of its power to mediate' (121). But in drawing a distinction between the wild, un-dominated of the 'before' and the exploited, domesticated of after, with his focus on the function of animals shifting from 'wild' to 'acquired...for the benefit of humans', the cat is left out, somehow in neither category (116). Neither really wild nor really domestic, the cat (still) refuses to perform the kind of labour which would make it complicit with the domesticating humanity exploiting its animal cousins by signalling its consent to the shared narrative. Interestingly, Ridout's essay concludes with a reading of Derrida's naked encounter with

his cat which covers him both in shame and shame in his shame, in which Derrida repeatedly speaks of ‘an animal, for example...a cat’ (Derrida 2002, e.g. 372, 380, 382, 383), even when he takes considerable inventorial pains elsewhere in the essay to differentiate species from species, ‘demonstrating ‘the infinite space which separates the lizard from the dog’ (Derrida 2002, 402). In this formulation – ‘the wholly other they call “animal”, for example “cat”’ – Derrida wishes to draw attention to the naming of the animals (380). Ridout’s stage cat – in Romeo Castellucci’s *Giulio Cesare* – is mechanical, with a spinning head (Ridout 2006, 104). Derrida’s is both real – in that it is Derrida’s cat, not (as he is at pains to point out, *not* Montaigne’s cat or anyone else’s) – but also an example of ‘the animal’, standing for difference from the human rather than particularity. The cat of the early modern stage is not an example, not mechanical; conversely it is both real and a symbol at the same time, but refuses to be categorised, resists Ridout’s clash between semiotics and phenomenology by not conforming to his competing binaries. His contention is that the competition between these modes of understanding theatre, problematized by the use of a stage animal, produces ‘affect’ by way of the physical body of the animal which ‘penetrates the membrane between its own “realness” and its signification’, and exposes ‘the labour of the animal at the service of a dominant humanity’, ‘the shame of our violent shared history’ (Ridout 2006, 125; 128). Ridout’s animals must inhabit both binaries in the same moment to produce this jarring ‘affect’, to penetrate the membrane, to be at once a sign and a phenomenon. His list of binaries sets ‘holy, wild, live, phenomenal, magic’ against ‘profane, domesticated, semiotised, sacrifice’ (Ridout 2006, 126). The cat – especially in the early modern imagination – sits more easily within the first set of binaries, and struggles against the second (though it can, naturally, be semiotised and sacrificed). In my potted history of cat-torture the feline does become



a symbol and a sacrifice for the feminine, is used as proxy in re-enacted wars of the sexes; but it is not a satisfying sacrifice: her participation is never willing and live cat action is wild and magic, a reminder primarily of the savage rather than an encounter with the civilised. The stage cat leans towards the primal by being barely domesticated, un-conformable to human subsistence needs, unable/willing to perform labour. It is generally uncivilised or – as Ridout might term it – *unpolitical* (my emphasis).

### ***The Vow-Breaker, of the fayre Maid of Clifton***

Jonson's bagged cat is followed (no Derridean pun intended) by Joshua's 'cat-in-a-string' (F2r) in William Sampson's *The Vow-Breaker* (Sampson 1636). There are no original performance records for this play other than the – probably spurious – claim on its title page that 'it hath been divers times Acted by severall Companies with great applause' (Sampson 1636, title page) and little is known about the circumstances surrounding its eruption onto the stage. William Sampson (1599/1600, *d.* 1636 or 1655) was a Nottinghamshire poet and playwright with a slender output (Kathman 2004).<sup>2</sup> He was a client of Sir Henry Willoughby of Risley, Derbyshire, who had also maintained the poet Phineas Fletcher, and it is possible to tell from Sampson's dedications where his political loyalties lay. His collection of poetry entitled *Virtus Post Funera Vivit* (1636) was clearly a bid for patronage from the Earl of Newcastle in whose pursuit he was, according to Sidney Lee, 'untiring' (Lee 2004). Had he lived past 1636, one assumes that Sampson (like his patron) would have aligned himself with the royalist party in the Civil War, since, on the evidence of his poetry, his acquaintance included many who later were in the patronage circle surrounding the Stanley-

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<sup>2</sup> There is some confusion about when Sampson died: Kathman opts for a date of 1655 because a William Sampson was named as executor of Risley's will that year. However, it is clear that Helen Sampson (his widow) was married in 1637 to the non-conformist minister Obadiah Grew, so William must have died by then. One of their sons, born 1635, was also William and it may be him named in the will.

Shirley poets, such as the Stanhopes and the Hastings (Grant 2013, 43-4). However, through his wife Sampson had connections to public figures of quite another sort: her second husband (supposedly recommended to her by Sampson himself) was the Presbyterian minister Obadiah Grew (Hughes 2004), and her brother, John Viccars, was convicted of holding conventicles in 1631 though he had conformed to Laudianism by 1640 (Toomer 2004). What else we know about him can really only be evinced by reading his work: in his play we can trace Jonsonian influence in plot and tone and it is clear that, like so many seventeenth-century authors, he is steeped in the Senecan tradition.

The play presents us with what looks like generic confusion: a cat (of all creatures the least likely to stick to the script) seems to offer us comic relief in a play which, though intended as tragedy, descends into melodramatic sub-Kydian fustian. It is not, however, the cat's fault; the main plot is a bit silly (domestic tragedy reminiscent of *The Spanish Tragedy*) and the introduction of Joshua the painter-stainer and his puss can only raise the tone. The play opens on an affecting scene between two young lovers, Young Bateman and Anne Boote, as we learn he is off to war, to fight the French during their occupation of Scotland during Mary Queen of Scots' minority, while Mary of Guise was Queen Regent of Scotland. The events of the play take place in 1560, just as an English relief force is sent north at the request of the Protestant Scots, the 'Lords of the Congregation' (or as the play calls them 'the federary Lords'), chafing under Catholic and foreign rule (see Griffin 2009, 36ff. for further historical background). Anne assures Young Bateman that she will wait for him because her love is so strong, and they wonder if her father's objection to their union might fade when he's away. The parental disapproval stems from the fact that Bateman and Boote do not get on, but more saliently for Anne's marital prospects that her father is a gold-digger and wants to marry her to an older, rich man called Germane. The play's voice of reason, Ursula, Anne's cousin, points out that being coupled 'for breed sake' without love is bound to end in tears (B3r). Even early in the play, Sampson gives us heavy-handed premonitions of doom.

Young Bateman begs Anne:

Swear not sweete Nan!  
The booke of fate, as now may be unclasp'd  
And record what thou speak'st! (B1v)

Juxtaposed with this domestic disaster-waiting-to-happen are the antics of a group of local 'guild' characters, also recruited to march on the French. Sir Jarvis Clifton, the local magnate, collects together, *inter alia*, Miles the Miller (who is wooing Ursula, not very successfully), Ball 'Old Huffis man' and Marmaduke Joshua, 'a Painter-Stainer by Art, and a limner by profession' (B3v). Joshua is a member of the Family of Love (D1v), the notorious but much misrepresented sect which came to be conflated in the seventeenth century with other non-conformist sects of Antinomianist beliefs such as the Ranters. Sampson picks up on Joshua's pacificism (many Familists were among the early Quakers) (C1v) and his interest in free love (not proven to be historically accurate of the sect, especially as early as 1560) (D1v). Indeed, as a sub-plot Joshua's story has considerable merits which are not immediately apparent. Even if the wars were merely an excuse to remove Young Bateman from Clifton so that Anne can break her vow, Sampson integrates their comic action thematically with the motifs controlling the central plot. Joshua is famous for his inability to keep sober, as Crosse and Ball make clear:

*Cros.* Will he be drunke?  
*Bal.* Most swine-like, and then by the vertue of his good liquor hee's  
able to convert any Brownisticall sister.  
*Cros.* An excellent quality!

(I1v)

Since we assume he has taken the pledge, and this is not the first time such behaviour has been displayed to us, it has to be taken as evidence of Joshua's sadly unsteady character, mirroring that rather less comical vow-breaking in the main plot.

This is not to suggest that Joshua, other than in displaying this tendency, is a cipher for Anne, but the war sub-plot in a wider sense is also concerned with faith and honour. It is possible that Sampson's choice of the Siege of Leith as his theatre of war alludes to what the English would

have thought of as a massive breach of faith – the Scots’ repudiation of a marriage agreed in 1542 between the infant Mary, Queen of Scots and Edward VI. This lack of faith is echoed in the French Colonels’ conduct of hostilities after a truce has been negotiated and agreed, and in Anne’s repudiation of her first engagement to Young Bateman in favour of a more worldly offer. Clifton is unstinting in his condemnation of the French Colonels’ dirty tricks, whereby they dress up as Scottish women to breach the English defences (Joshua is as keen on women as he is on wine):

*Clif.* Base minded Doysels cowardly Mortigue,  
 Though all advantages in warr are lawfull  
 Th’are not commendable? you came like your selves  
 Frenchifi’d truls, to scould us from our Trenches  
 But not to beate us?  
(D1v-D2r)

Sampson might be trying to illustrate the adage ‘all’s fair in love and war’ and he makes a deliberate, if ungallant, dramatic connection between the dastardly French and faithless women, while illustrating the susceptibility of honest men. As if the dramatic gesture were not enough, the very next scene presents Ursula in her guise as cynical narrator enumerating the faithlessness of women in general, as evidenced by her cousin Anne’s ‘weathercock’ behaviour. She is not only commentating on the Anne/Bateman debacle but also specifically on Joshua’s credulous acceptance of the pretend-women’s promises of sweeping and kissing in the previous scene. Ursula’s warning, ‘created Fooles be those men that credits us!’ (D2r-v) comes too late both for Young Bateman and for Clifton’s ‘one man / Whose head they basely pearch upon the walls’ (D1v).

The main tragic plot runs its course, with Young Bateman hanging himself in despair at Anne’s perfidy, and with the appearance of his menacing ghost in the Senecan tradition repeating the phrase, which harks back to their promises of the first scene, ‘Alive or dead I must, and will enjoy thee’ (F1r). Anne’s older husband, Germane, departs the day after the wedding for Newcastle for a sojourn of ‘twelve Moones’ (E4r), leaving her pregnant (with some ambiguity about who

fathered her child) and in the care of Old Boote. Despite her rejection of the idea that she will be 'Afraid on's Ghost' (E4r), the third act sees Anne tormented by a ghost only she can see and which won't leave her alone. After she is brought to bed of her baby girl, she begs the gossips attending her lying-in to remain awake and prevent her from doing herself a mischief when the ghost appears. Naturally they drink too much, fall asleep and she drowns herself in the nearby Trent in despair. Old Boote and Old Bateman, sworn enemies up to this point, conclude Act IV as 'friends' 'for this infants sake' (H4r). Act V sees a startling change of tone, tying up the remaining plot strands in comic fashion: the English triumph in the peace accord with France – an echo of the accommodation come to by the bereaved fathers – and Miles' wooing of Ursula continues as the trades present a morris dance. In the tradition of the benevolent monarchs of *The Shoemaker's Holiday* and *If You Know Not Me*, Queen Elizabeth appears in the last scene to support the Trent being made 'navigable to Gainsborough...Boston, Kingston, Humber, and Hull' (I4v) and to reward the war heroes with knighthoods (K1r-K2r) (see Griffin 2009, 70ff.).

### **'Knowing the proverb too, Cat after Kinde.'**

Ursula has a strange habit of speech for a young lady, as we can see from her first appearance. Of her five short speeches in the first scene, three are based around animal imagery. Of course, we should have suspected from her name that she might interpret the world in terms other than human and she provides excellent readings of the world she recognises, which attach themselves to the reader's consciousness of character. She is fond of metaphor in general, but particularly of an earthy kind contrasting with the civilised and predictable niceties which Bateman and Anne exchange. Where Anne pronounces 'Be it writ in brasse, / My love shall be as durable as that!' (B1v), Ursula would have it that 'we young wenches in our loves are like *Lapwinges*, if once

we creepe out o'th shells, we run from our ould loves like *Scopperells*' (B2r).<sup>3</sup> Ursula's consciousness of the on-going battle between Old Boote and Old Bateman runs in terms of a cock-fight: Bateman is an 'ould cocke' and she wishes that 'thy spurrs were new rowell'd that thou might picke out his eyes' (B2r). She sees the marriage mart thus: 'we must be coupld in wed-locke like your *Barbary* horse, and *Spanish* Gennet, for breede sake, house to house, and land to land' (B3r). She speaks more to the audience than to the characters on stage, assuming a confidential relationship which predisposes it to accept her world where humans are talking animals.

It is in this context that the full subtlety of the subplot becomes apparent. The scenes involving Joshua (I.iii, B3v; II.ii, F2r-F3r; V.i, H4v-I2r) comment directly on the behaviour or fate of Anne, juxtaposed as they are with her doings in the main plot. Robert Darnton shows that cats have an 'ambiguous ontological position, a straddling of conceptual categories' because 'they express the humanity in animals along with the animality in men – and especially of women' (Darnton 1985, 91). Usually, regardless of culture, the cat is specifically a female symbol: the ancient Egyptians worshipped a female cat goddess called Bast; 'Freyja, the Scandinavian goddess of fertility, of beauty, love and marriage, adopted the cat as one of her cult animals, and when she did not ride her horse into battle she travelled in a chariot drawn by cats' (Briggs 1980, 1; 4). Even in early modern scientific treatises it is always assumed that the cat is female:

The nature of this beast is, to love the place of *her* breeding, neither will she tarry in any strange place...most contrary to the nature of a Dogge, who will travaile abroad with *his* master. (my italics)  
(Topsell 1607, 105)

This last quotation makes it clear how gendered Topsell considered the dog and cat to be, as late as 1607. These stereotypes were based on the supposed behaviour of the animals concerned: dogs were fierce, loyal and downright manly, while the best Topsell has to say of cats is 'it is needelesse

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<sup>3</sup> OED defines 'scopperil' as a spinning top and cites Sampson's usage as an example. It also gives 'squirrel' as a dialectal usage which might lead one to conjecture that, carrying on the animal metaphor, this is the meaning which Sampson intended. Wright (1904) has both meanings for the vicinity of Nottinghamshire.

to spend any time about her loving nature to man, how she flattereth by rubbing her skinne against ones Legges, how she whurleth with her voice, having as many tunes as turnes' (Topsell 1607, 105). In 1562 John Heywood's *Proverbs and Epigrams* contained this gem, 'A woman hath nyne lyues like a cat.' The idea was current in the drama of the period, also—Dekker has Lazarillo in *Blurt, Master Constable* quibble on the supposed similarities:

I shal be mowzed by pusse-cattes, but I had  
rather dye a dogs death; they have nine lives a peece  
(like a woman) and they will make it up ten lives,  
if they and I fall a scratching.

(Dekker 1602, F3r)

Notice that his imagination not only turns cats into women, but also his masculine self into a dog for the purposes of the contretemps. So, having been identified with women from the earliest times, cats were read as a symbol of female sexuality in early modern France, and evidence suggests that it was much the same in England. *OED* cites Phillip Stubbes's *Anatomy of Abuses* as the earliest example of 'pussy' being used to denote a woman: 'You shall have every sawcy boy...to catch up a woman & marie her...So he have his pretie pussie to huggle withall, it forceth not.' The examples for this sense of 'puss' come from *The Honest Whore Part 1* (II.iii): 'This wench (your new Wife)...This Shee-cat will have more liues then your last Pusse had'; and *The Alchemist* (V.iii): 'The bawdy Doctor, and the cosening Captaine, and Pus my suster'. For this reason Joshua's cat has to be seen as more than a comic gesture. Furthermore, Jonson's implied parallel, previously discussed, between Puntarvolo's sniffing cat and his sulking wife in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, urges us to believe that Sampson associates his female protagonist, Anne, with Joshua's cat.

The significant scenes involving the cat correspond to crucial moments for Anne. The first appearance of the ghost to Anne in III.i is followed immediately by Joshua's indictment, in III.ii, of his cat for catching a mouse on a Sunday which he insists must result in hanging. Joshua and the ghost act as revealers of wrong, but, significantly, in circumstances where the wrong results from behaviour which is natural or expected. Miles points out to Joshua that it is ludicrous to hang

a mouser for doing its job, particularly ‘Knowing the proverb too, Cat after Kinde.’ (F2v) (see Tilley 1950, C135 and C136). Miles’s comment is explained fully by the mediæval Latin signifier for a domestic cat, which was *musio* (mouser) or *catus* (catcher). The cat was notable in bestiaries for this ability: ‘catching mice was clearly seen as its most important role in medieval days’ (George and Yapp 1991, 115-116). The proverbs of the Renaissance and the characters of *The Vow-Breaker* share this world-view. Joshua is well aware of the nature of his cat as ‘the corrector or extirper of vermine, as Rats, Mice and other waspish animals’ (F2v). In the same way Ursula (and her audience) and Old Boote, at least, are sure that unfaithfulness in love is as natural to women as mousing is to cats. Indeed, Sampson makes this explicit by echoing, in ‘Cat after Kinde’, Old Bateman’s warning to his son in the first scene that ‘women by kinde are fickle’ (B2v). Being a naturally female character, the cat’s atavistic behaviour nods in the direction of Anne’s equally expected perfidious reaction to a long and enforced separation from her lover. Lord Grey of Wilton, the English General, is sure that the cat is female: ‘Would she could mew, *non* guilty’ (F3r) and Joshua always refers to ‘her’ in the third person: ‘her knavery’ (F2r); ‘She did kill a Mouse’ (F2v). However, he calls the cat by the name Tybert (F2v) following the *Reynard* stories, where all the main animal characters are male (although wives do make cameo appearances, usually with consequences disastrous for them. (Caxton 1960, 108-9; 51-2)). At no other point in the play does the puss have a name but the indictment calls for a formality which demands that ‘she’ be properly addressed. Sampson has chosen Tybert presumably because it is the best known of cat names and, though it is a male name in *Reynard*, its shortening, Tib or Tibbie, is a contraction of Isabel commonly used in the North of England. The association with the name Theobald, or *Tibalt*, with cats was first made by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet*, II.iv.18-9:

*Benvolio*: Why, what is Tybalt?  
*Mercutio*: More than Prince of Cats.

Shakespeare’s pun deliberately confused the homophonic origins of Tybert and Thibault, from Flemish and Dutch and Old French respectively (*OED*). The word Tib for a female cat



corresponds to the male Tom-cat; both names seem to have been adopted from generic terms for boy and girl: ‘Tib and Tom’, consonant with ‘Jack and Jill’ (*OED*). Probably Sampson named his Tibbie-cat Tybert from *Reynard* without considering that this might create a gendering problem: for him the words’ close similarity argued a common root which worked for both sexes and he had already made it abundantly clear that the cat in question was female.

### **The Uncanny: Ghosts and Cats**

Setting these scenes next to each other, the dramatic contours of the play dictate a comparison between the disbelief which meets the appearance of the ghost and of Joshua’s proposed hanging of his cat. The bustle created in III.i by Anne’s sighting of Young Bateman’s spectre and the fuss that the bystanders make at Joshua’s proposal is understandable, since Boote thinks he is dealing with ‘sorcery’ and that Old Bateman ‘has combined with some witch, / To vex thy quiet patience’ (F1v). Equally, the soldiers realise they are dealing with religion-gone-mad personified by Joshua. Of course, they take the cat business less seriously than Boote and Ursula do the ghost because it is a cat’s life at stake not Anne’s. Boote knows her life is threatened, just as is the pussy’s: he guesses Young Bateman’s aim to be ‘That he would haunt thee dead, as oft he said’ (F1v) and is reinforced in this view by the ghost whose minatory repeated ‘Alive or dead’ (F1r) adumbrates Anne’s doom.

Those binaries of Ridout’s mentioned earlier – ‘holy, wild, live, phenomenal, magic’ set against ‘profane, domesticated, semiotised, sacrifice’ (Ridout 2006, 126) – colour a reading of these juxtaposed scenes by encouraging us, as modern readers of the play, to consider what Freud called ‘the class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar’ (Freud 1990, 340). *Unheimlich*, the uncanny, is the opposite of *heimlich*, ‘homely’, and it is in this context that we might contemplate both Young Bateman’s ghost and Joshua’s cat. Freud reproduces a large amount of text from Sanders’s *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache* (1860) as part of the

etymological portion of his exploration of the uncanny, and it is notable that *heimlich* is used in German to mean of animals ‘tame’ or ‘companionable to man’ (Freud 1990, 342). If we consider Ridout’s binaries it is clear that *unheimlich* has strong consonances with the first set, those which ‘wild’ the animal, which return to a ‘pre-tragic theatre’ (Ridout 2006, 119). In fact, in passing Ridout notes that animals on the stage have ‘the *uncanny* capacity to...look back at those who look’ (Ridout 2006, 127) (my emphasis) and it is this recognitive contact which reminds audiences of human domination of animals by reminding us of the unhomeliness of animals, their ‘holy, wild, live, phenomenal, magic’ qualities. Cats, – and perhaps here Derrida *was* motivated by more than a ‘for example’ – who struggle with being domesticated and *heimlich* more than any other animal, encourage an audience to confront the pre-tragic, the pre-civilised, and if it does not quite shame us, it does unnerve us. So Sampson’s use of a cat, perhaps like Derrida’s ‘for example’, may point to a metaphorical usefulness based on gut feeling, on a half-recollected sense that cats are *unheimlich*, ‘eerie, weird’ (Freud 1990, 345).

This connection between cats and the uncanny is not new, of course. Edgar Allan Poe’s 1843 story, ‘The Black Cat’, is generally read as a study of the psychology of guilt but, post-Freud, Pluto’s uncanniness is foregrounded (see, e.g., Madden 1993). Cats have had a sinister reputation for centuries, a reputation which both causes and encourages the connections between them and witches but, after Freud, readings of literary cats are coloured by a theoretical concern for the unconscious which might make us reconsider *The Vow-Breaker*, even if (or maybe because) it predates by so many centuries the ‘invention’ of the uncanny. In a play so heavily influenced by *Hamlet* as is *The Vow-Breaker*, the temptation to consider a Freudian reading is strong and the main plot’s ghost and the use of a stage cat seem to emphasise the uncanny before it was invented.

The parallel between the lives of Anne and the cat is strengthened by the proximity of their death scenes: Anne is brought back home, having drowned herself, by her gossips (H3r-v) and it is in the next scene that we learn that Joshua, like the ghost with Anne, has prevailed with the

pussy-cat:

*Cros.* Me thinks he should hang himselfe for the jest sake.  
*Bal.* As he did his Cat for killing a Mouse on Sunday  
(11v)

This proximity is a clear indication that their fates are intertwined and might seem to undermine the importance of Anne's tragedy by trite comparison with a cat. But on the contrary, the effect achieved highlights the suddenness of death and the relative and identical unimportance of the loss of a cat or a faithless woman. It is true that Bateman and Boote seniors grieve (identically) for their children, but the wider world continues just as if nothing had happened: Joshua drowns his sorrows in drink; Miles and Ball squabble about who is to be the hobby-horse in the victory play and Ursula is even prompted to begin to accept Miles's advances. Act 5 is comic, unstable in the way it rounds off the action. The cat and Anne have no place in the festivities; their parts have been played out. Why should this be so?

### **This Shee-cat will have more liues then your last Pusse had**

Perhaps their first appearances give some clue as to their expendability. The pussy first enters the fray when Joshua is horrified to learn that he has brought 'the poore Pusse forth to dy by a Gun! a poore Pusse, silly harmeless Pusse' (C1v) and such is his outrage that he abandons his hitherto pacifist principles (at B3v, he objected that 'it were obnoxious, and inuitiable, and contrary to the sages to presse me') now asserting that 'my Cat, and I will enter battell 'gainst the wicked!' (C1v). Joshua's *volte-face* has a profound effect on the part of the hapless cat, since, now that she is tied behind him, they are inseparable and his fate is apparently to be hers. Anne, pushed by her father into breaking faith with Young Bateman in favour of rich-but-old Germane, effects the same sort of *volte-face* in the very next scene when she is forced to justify her change of opinion to her cousin, Ursula. In some sense, Anne is Old Boote's 'cat' tied behind him, and necessarily obedient to his direction. However much she tries to maintain that she is still mistress of her fate

and reasons as if it were her own decision to renege on the vow, here is a clear intention on Sampson's part to show that Anne has lost control. He indicates, by drawing the parallel between the girl and the cat, that the similarities between cat and woman are not accidental but depend, not only on a behavioural likeness, but on their importance in the scheme of nature. Sampson is not a proto-feminist by any means; his delineation of these similarities may betray his own unconscious reading of woman's place, though his callous dispatching of the cat glances at an understanding of the brutality to which women, with little power of choice, were subjected in the male-advantaged marriage mart.

So, then, given that Anne is the cat's natural analogue, why does the cat not belong to her? Why should her owner be so clearly characterised as Joshua, the Familist painter-stainer? Of all the characters in the play he should be the easiest to decode because his religious beliefs, though stereotypical, are clearly defined. According to the *DNB*, 'Sampson's efforts to attract the patronage of the Cavendishes were untiring', suggesting a religious and political stance akin to their conservative Laudianism (Lee 2004). Joshua's membership of the Family of Love, in the climate of the 1630s, would have seemed to most sections of society to be tantamount to heresy. Even though the religious divides between Laudians and Puritans became entrenched as the 1630s wore on, extreme sects like the Familists were still fair game for ribbing from both sides. In fact Joshua's characterisation is comically affectionate, largely consisting as it does of his hypocrisy and a marked inability to stick to any of his principles, except a nit-picking preservation of the holiness of the Sabbath. Brett Usher has argued that many of the mercantile guilds in early-modern London had protestant connections, probably on account of their strong trading links with continental non-conformists: the Mercers' Company, for instance, was traditionally a refuge for those exiled Huguenots whose original trade had been cloth (Usher 1999, 105-34). We know that the Painter-Stainers had a Presbyterian Warden in the 1640s, William Williamson, who subsequently became Master in 1651 (Liu 1986, 81). Since many painters fled the continent during this period to escape

religious persecution, the Painter-Stainers' protestant reputation was reinforced by the Dutch and French painters living in England. Of course, the consonances are bolstered by the origin of the Family of Love in the Low Countries; the ideas of the Western Low German founder, Hendrik Niclaes, were brought to England in the 1570s by the Delftenaar Christopher Vittels, the English translator of Niclaes' extensive writings (Hamilton 2004).

In this context, choosing a Painter-Stainer Familist to lead a cat might have further significance. Cats were uncommon in bestiaries, as we have seen, comment being confined generally to their mousing; their appearance in Gothic art is infrequent and, for the most part, medieval iconography ignores the symbolic attributes of cats (Lipton 1992, 364). A major exception to this is the use to which early illustrated *Bibles Moralisées* put cats—as symbols for Jews and heretics made explicit by the obsessive pictorial linking of these miscreants and the domestic cat. Sara Lipton insists that the *Bibles* do not differentiate clearly between the two groups, and indeed that 'precise identification of the heretics ... is both futile and unnecessary [because] the errors of the 'publicans' [are not] mentioned in enough detail in the *Bible Moralisée* to allow for a definite identification of their beliefs' (Lipton 1992, 371).<sup>4</sup> The *Bibles* use cat-worship to mark out anti-Christian doctrine: amongst many examples, figuring a scene where a hooded man kneels to kiss the anus of a domestic cat to illustrate 'herror hereticorum' (the error of heretics) and dramatising Gad's deception by false prophets by having men in pointed hats (symbolising the Jews) worship a cat who sits on an altar as their idol (Lipton 1992, 366; 370). These images, of course, have strong associations with witchcraft. Alain de Lille explained the etymology of 'Cathar' thus: 'Cathars are called after the cat, because they kiss the posterior of a cat in whose shape, it is said, Lucifer appears to them' (Lipton 1992, 368-9). The association of cats and witches could, therefore, be seen to originate in that animal's associations with the heretical Cathars and,

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<sup>4</sup> 'Publicans' became a general term for heretics, after having stood for, amongst others, eleventh-century Manichaean heretics and for the Waldensians.

interestingly, ‘the European witch-craze developed from the persecution of the Catharsists and Albigenses in thirteenth-century France...Many of the accusations made against witches were identical to those previously brought against the heretical sects. In a series of Papal Bulls, culminating in that of 1484, sorcery and witchcraft were gradually equated with heresy’ (Harris 1980, 5). Though these sources are early, widespread acceptance of cats as diabolical in the sixteenth century can be adduced from Topsell’s opinion that cats are ‘unclean and impure’ beasts and that ‘the familiars of Witches do most ordinarily appeare in the shape of cats, which is an argument that this beast is dangerous in soule and body’ (Topsell 1607, 106). Their association with pagan worship is also apparent in Topsell, who records that the ‘Egyptians place them for hallowed beasts’, and that

not onely the Egyptians were fooles in this kind, but the Arabians also, who worshipped a cat for a God; and when the cat dyed ... they [carried] the beaste to the Temple, where the Priests ... gave it a holy funeral in *Bubastum* (which was a burying place for cattles near the Altar).

(Topsell 1607, 102-3)

In these contexts it is not unreasonable to detect in Joshua’s pet a symbol of his Familism, a doctrine accepted by almost everyone in the 1630s as heretical. Joshua does not worship his cat, of course, but his association with this creature may have been prompted by Sampson’s knowledge that heretics in religious tracts were figured traditionally with the diabolical feline. The ghost scenes of *The Vow-Breaker* probably have as their ultimate source a treatise which detailed devilish revenge hauntings, even if the lore was refracted through popular suspicion or plays more than academic study, but this does make it clear that the machinations of the diabolical were of interest to Sampson. Many of the same works which described the interference of ghosts and incubuses in the mortal world, such as Bartholomaeus della Spina’s *Quaestio de Strigibus* (1576), also gave details of witches’ covens, practices and familiars. Reginald Scot, who was (interestingly) rumoured to be a Familist, debunked such tomes in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), and this was a source for many early modern plays, including *Macbeth*. In such a climate, Sampson must have connected the

cat with witchcraft, and witchcraft with heresy: Puss is the perfect pet for a stock heretic.

Both Louis Wright and W. J. Lawrence see the significance of *The Vow-Breaker's* cat as being a re-write of Pennyboy's dogs' trial in *The Staple of News*. In fact, except that they are both ostensibly trials, there are few similarities: Pennyboy observes judicial process but the constant interruptions will not allow Joshua to get past his opening speech. *The Staple of News*, being a comedy, abandons its animal-trial, whereas Joshua's cat is summarily executed without proper proceedings, for Wright is horribly misled if he thinks that 'the bit of buffoonery is over with the observation, "A pleasant Tragicomedy, the Cat being Scap't." (Wright 1927, 664). But the dramaturgical value of a cat on stage goes beyond 'buffoonery'. As Bill Berloni attests, a cat might cause havoc, because it is altogether less biddable and willing to please man than more trainable animals. Topsell notes it is not a truly domesticated creature, 'never willing to forsake the house, for the love of any man' (Topsell 1607, 105). This being so, the scenes in *The Vow-Breaker* involving Joshua might be punctuated by yowls of protest from the cat on a string. This might suggest a comic heightening, as has been noticed in Crab's misbehaviour in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where his extra-dramatic antics are the product of boredom or interesting smells (Beadle 1994). A cat misbehaving on stage, however, suggests distress, since cats are generally shyer and react much less well to restraint. So, Sampson's yowling cat would be more likely to give the impression of desperation than interest; it is tragic not comic. Just as Anne tries to flee the Ghost, a cat on stage might try to scratch and bite her constrainers in an attempt to get free, reinforcing the parallel helplessness of woman and animal. On top of this, the yowling of the cat would make the Joshua scenes unpleasant rather than comic for the audience. No matter how much a Renaissance audience was supposed to like cruelty to animals, the sheer noise created by a cornered cat would render the scene disturbing, at least aurally, for the spectators. There is something faintly human about a cat's yowl which shocks while it excites.

**“Love of Home”** (Topsell 1607, 105)

All three early modern cat plays focus on the domestic, and this is not an accident. Topsell notes on several occasions that the cat is essentially a homebody, ‘Once cattles were all wilde, but afterward they retyred to houses’ (103) and that ‘The nature of this Beast is, to loue the place of her breeding’ (105). Gammer Gurton’s Gib and Lady Puntarvolo’s pet inhabit the feminine space of the hearth and particularly in the latter case, resist promptings to leave this domain. But this impulse pulls against the essentially unconformable nature of the cat. Tybert in *The Vow-Breaker* seems exceptional: Joshua is male and insists that his cat follow him to Scotland – a disruption of all accepted notions about the early modern cat and its place in society. Boehrer has argued that Gib in *Gammer Gurton’s Needle* (and cats in general) ‘functions as a sacrificial stand-in, a scape-goat (scapecat?)’ (2010, 122-3). *The Vow-Breaker*’s use of its cat – as a facsimile for Anne – operates in the same way, with the strength of the imitation being in the way each is controlled by her master. This explains Tybalt being taken abroad; this explains Anne’s enforced change of heart. Ridout’s binaries need reassessing for the early modern cat: though these creatures may be in the *domus*, their ‘domestication’ seems enforced. The feminine and the feline – like the tension between ‘known’ and ‘novel’ Freud found in the uncanny – share an instability: feminine is human but not fully; feline is domestic but not domesticated. This tension plays out in genre in *The Vow-Breaker* which is ostensibly a tragedy, but with a comic fifth act. Ridout would have us rethink the possibility of satisfying animal sacrifice on the stage – reminding us that confronting a *real* cat foregrounds our recognition of the human capacity to torture and abuse. It has become apparent that one way of encouraging audience affect might be to emphasise the parallels between a persecuted or helpless animal and the tragic heroine, suggesting a concomitant foregrounding of the exploitation of women, at least in the play. In *The Vow-Breaker*, then, are we dealing with tragedy?



*The Vow-Breaker* changes gear jerkily and suddenly. The first four acts complete a cycle of tragic narrative as far as a mediocre seventeenth-century playwright might imagine it, but the fifth act is out of kilter. One possible reason for this odd dramatic contour is the destabilising presence of the cat, which can probably be accounted for by the fact that this play was most likely coterie drama, written for the household. *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, written for students at Christ's Cambridge, also exploited a comic metadramatical potential which must have encouraged the casting of the College cat (Grant 2001, 145). In Sampson's play, one likes to imagine, the part of Tybert was taken by a domestic cat from Risley Hall (the family seat) and the other parts, as was common in regional drama, by household retainers. We probably cannot rule out incidental comedy in these circumstances, with 'Joshua' surely having to scoop up the recalcitrant cat for exits and entrances. So even though the first four acts are tragic, they are themselves destabilised by the comic potential of the coterie cat. Can they be said to elicit pity and fear? And provide *catharsis*? Ridout argues – following Vidal-Naquet – that 'sacrifice is intrinsic to tragic form' (122). In *The Vow-Breaker* neither sacrificial victim accepts her fate willingly and it is this return to the pre-tragic, 'known of old' as Freud might have it – holy, wild, live, phenomenal, magic – which Sampson struggles to contain.

*The Vow-Breaker* does make an attempt at *catharsis*, one could argue, by tying up the action in neat parallels at the end of Act 4: Anne, Young Bateman (and the cat) dead; Boote and Bateman reconciled; successful and even-handed peace in Scotland. But Act 5 shows that the playwright senses either that there is more to do, or that his coterie audience will not support a sour taste in its mouth. By instinct Sampson fills the final act with civic and community bonding, with festive celebration reinforcing of the reconciled *status quo* and with a morris dance, complete with hobby horse. So the final act of the play seeks to restore the ritual of tragedy, disturbed by the various uncontrollable variables in the main plot, by means of ritual animal disguise. This is both a tragic device (Burkert 1979, 56-6) and one which excludes women (who are not invited to perform;

indeed are negated by men in drag) from the reconciliation rituals. It is a successful effacing of the pre-tragic – the glow from the reconciliation implied in the morris dance, neatly paired with Queen Elizabeth's blessing of the local civic dignitaries and their aspirations – and in the boy player taking the role of Elizabeth it also effaces the feminine. The play ends having tried to argue forcefully for the second set of binaries, where the profane, domesticated, semiotised, sacrificial world-view is normalised, where 'real life' is emphasised. But the holy, the magic and the wild are still difficult to contain: 'Proud France, and poisoning Spaine' will be quelled by 'A virgin's arme' (K2r) and Ursula continues to resist Miles's advances in spite of his 'caution to remember Bateman, and his sweet, your cozen' (I3v). Ursula offers hope that the tragic cycle need not be endlessly repeated.

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